



Josephine Pryde, *Chains*, 2004, chains and wire, dimensions variable.

## JOSEPHINE PRYDE

### CUBITT GALLERY

It is so easy to be carried along by the preferences of the moment, to take decisions on the basis of common knowledge, cliché, and trite assumption. If Josephine Pryde's photographs appear reticent, even gnomic, it is due in large part to her dislike for such uncritical behavior. Where they might seem to flirt with blankness, they do so as much to recall and tap into photography's other history as a medium for scientific experiment, observation, and record as to shine a light on some consumerist aesthetic of dumbness. The eye of the consumer is there, naturally, but that's not all there is. The starting point for this show was an article in *The Economist* on how "men lose their fiscal prudence in the presence of attractive women." Not only do our brains work in predictable, gender-specific ways; even our economic decisions are strongly influenced by visions of beauty. Six photographs made up the *Brains* (all works 1004) of "Brains and Chains," while *Chains* consisted of an extensive tangle of bicycle, motorbike, and saw chains suspended from the ceiling by wires. The images represent the organ in different but related ways: set on a mirrored surface under red light, multiply exposed, solarized, overlaid with a street scene taken from inside a cab at night, pierced by several shards of mirror, and, finally, displayed to show a row of ulcerlike features that might be the remnants of connective tissue or evidence of pathology. The techniques used by Pryde in this sequence echo the Futurist art of Balla, Boccioni, Carra, and Bragaglia, but the solarization additionally alludes to Man Ray, while the condensation covering the mirrored surface in the first photograph reminds us of Walter Benjamin's statement that what makes adverts superior to criticism is not what they say but the neon's reflection in the fiery puddle beneath. We have, then, Futurism, Dada, and Surrealism—an avant-garde, traditionally understood as a complex array of muscular cultural forces, struggling to comprehend the impact and implications of a vast array of new technology. The sculpture *Chains* directly references Eva Hesse's *Untitled*, 1970, seen recently in the Hesse retrospective at Tate Modern. That latex-covered rope-and-string affair has by now become iconic, its deliberately formed formlessness, its soft and pliable materials, and its mutability having hardened in our minds over the past thirty-five years into the exemplary image of sensitive and gender-aware creativity. What's not to like? And because it's so easy to like it, what does it mean now to say that you do? Pryde's reworking attempts to dislodge the piece from its pedestal, to peel off the encrusted, ossifying layers of critical approbation that have closed around it over the years, to put it back into contention. It's an exercise akin to that of Werner Büttner and Albert Oehlen in the mid-'80s—shortly before Pryde herself went to live for a period in Cologne—in their article "Defending Kiefer Against His Devotees."

In pitching these two elements—the brains and the chains—against one another, Pryde's work conducts an argument. It does not accept a place in the scheme of things but works to establish one. It is aware, contentious, polemical. All certainties are rendered unusable without further careful appraisal. By all means use them again in future, but at least think a little first.

—Michael Archer